

Kabataan News Network: Cutting through the Clutter

Interview by

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In 2003, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), together with Probe Media Foundation, Inc., launched the Kabataan News Network (KNN), the first local TV program that is conceptualized and produced by adolescents aged 13 to 16 years from various regions in the country. To set up KNN, UNICEF and Probe recruited young people from different regions and trained them in the various aspects of TV program production. KNN takes pride in the fact that every material aired in this program is solely the work of its young pool of reporters and staff.

The person behind KNN is Dale Rutstein, former Communications Chief of UNICEF Philippines. Rutstein noted that while the Philippines has a “good history of producing local shows [for children]”, such as Batibot and 5 and Up, the number of hours of quality children’s TV programs in the country has been declining. Further, he observed that while there are existing efforts to empower the youth, through such institutions as the Sangguniang Kabataan and the National Youth Commission, a lot of other possible venues for “developing the youth and helping them gain skills for civic engagement and participation” remain untapped. One of these is television, “the most powerful communication medium in the Philippines”. Thus, Rutstein conceptualized a TV program showcasing the talents and skills of the youth as writers, reporters, and producers; promoting children’s rights and welfare; and enlightening young people and adults alike on pressing social issues.



While KNN is successful in terms of implementation, it has not been able to attract a large number of viewers and consequently has failed to gain the support of broadcast channels on free television. In this interview in late 2007, Rutstein expresses his frustration over the media environment in the Philippines and shares UNICEF’s alternative plans for KNN.

Q : *I learned that you were planning to conduct an evaluation on KNN. Did this push through? What were the results of the evaluation?*

A : The evaluation was, I have to say, extremely positive. It found that KNN had a huge impact on the lives of the young people who were a part of the program. Their awareness of social issues increased, their skills on advocacy and media were enhanced significantly, the bureaus that we formed were run very well, and the reporters were very enthusiastic about their work. We primarily evaluated how the program was implemented from a project point of view, not from a television show point of view. So that evaluation was largely about how the Probe Media Foundation was running the program, how they were implementing it, and how the participants were getting along.

Q : *So it was more of an internal evaluation rather than an audience-centered evaluation?*

A : Yes. We originally wanted to do a two-part evaluation: an evaluation of the way the project was implemented as a development project, and an audience evaluation through a survey of household viewers. We never got around to that second part because we did not have the time to contract that last year. We realized that while we wanted to contract the evaluation as one job, there were actually two jobs to be done. And the companies that we were talking to could either do one of that or the other, but not both. And so we had to split it up. Now the second part, the audience evaluation, is on hold. In fact, the KNN is probably going to be cancelled. It's not going to be on the air any longer because it couldn't get any ratings.

Q : *Is this in connection with the support you have or have not gained from broadcast channels?*

A : The media environment in the Philippines does not support quality programming. It only supports very superficial, lowest common denominator entertainment. We realized that after four years of trying to do KNN. We set the bar very high, because we realized that there was no point in creating a show that will always be relying on external funding. We actually started the project with the idea that in about four years, we would become self-sustaining in the commercial environment. I still think that it could be done, but a broadcaster would have to give it a chance – find a time slot for it, and give it time to grow. Unfortunately, the television industry does not have that kind of time. We set the bar very high and we failed to reach it. It would be nice if the television industry tried to find a place for a show like KNN but the reality is that there isn't a place.

Q : *What does this say about the broadcast television industry of the Philippines?*

A : [Television] is very expensive; it's bottom line-driven, profit-oriented. TV is a very expensive medium. And that's one of the main reasons it has never really been successful at addressing social problems. It has only been successful in selling products and promoting politicians. And it relies on huge investments and repetitive viewing, showing things over and over again.

[There are] only very few examples of television programs that have really made a significant difference in social development. And all those programs have a lot of funding. They're usually supported by governments. But there's no government funding for

social service television, public service television broadcasting in the Philippines.

Q : *So you mean to say not one broadcast channel gave you a timeslot for KNN?*

A : We finally got it on Channel 2, which was our objective. We wanted to get it on Channel 2 or Channel 7. We finally got it on Channel 2 at 7 a.m., on Saturday morning, which is the time when pre-school children are watching TV. But that is the time slot when most adolescents are not awake. KNN is a show for adolescents, but that time slot was the best we could get from Channel 2. And we were cancelled right away, because our ratings weren't good.

UNICEF does not have enough money to keep funding the show on its own. We wanted KNN to find its own legs to see if it would survive. UNICEF is typically in the business of funding an ambitious television show like that. We wanted to get it up and running, and then hand it over.

Q : *What are your plans for KNN, now that you can't get through mainstream media?*

A : We are trying to look at KNN Phase 2. We're trying to look at KNN not necessarily as a television show but as a young people's media collaborative effort, a media collective. There's a possibility that we could run this on cable TV or very small networks. But we're trying to create a website, where thousands of young people can go and upload their pictures, their commentaries, maybe some audio clips. Maybe there's a way that they can send a text message, and have it go to some kind of

dynamic online network. We want to create something which would be a blend of *YouTube* and *MySpace*.

Q : *Like social networking sites?*

A : Yes, but with a cause. [It's] social networking based on young people's contribution of media material. And it could be still pictures, it could be text, it could be audio messages, it could be video clips, unedited [or] edited. We're trying to develop a concept where you have, at the top level, structured video clips of stories online, produced by KNN reporters and teams. And there would be another level of space where you can have all kinds of unstructured media content on children's rights.

Q : *So for example I have a video clip and I upload it in the website, it could be selected from all the files that the children have uploaded?*

A : We would put everything up, everything that would meet a certain standard. You can't be slanderous. [Your material] has to be true, it has to comply with all the laws, and it has to be a contribution for realizing children's rights in the Philippines – either exposing a situation that needs to be followed up, or simply giving an opinion, a point of view of a young person on an issue that is very important to him or her.

We know that the Internet is still not available to all Filipinos. It's nothing like the 70% to 80% of all the Filipinos who have television. What we know right now is that probably five percent or less has Internet at home. What we're more interested in is how many young people have email addresses. I think it is probable that 30 to 40 percent of Filipino youth have email addresses,

certainly the ones in school. If you have an email address, you go online. If you go online, you can participate in a website, in a social network like KNN. It will be a space where kids can go online safely and really tell it like it is.

Q : *What is the basis of this idea of getting into new media instead of the traditional television?*

A : Well, it's the way everything is going. We noticed that in KNN, every week we had hundreds of emails from all over the country—South Cotobato, Palawan—when we were on Channel 2. Every week we had about 100 or 200 emails [from] a variety of social networking sites like *Hi5*, *Friendster*, [or] *Yahoo! Groups*. So we could tell that there was a lively following of the show that was communicating with us online. And so we thought, this is what kids are doing today, and there are more Internet cafes. At some point in the future, everyone would have access to the Internet. It's only a matter of time. So if TV industry is not available to us, the way we would like it to be, we will go online – start with something that in 5 or 10 years will be much cheaper to produce, will involve a lot of collaboration from all the young people in the country, and [will yield results that are] immediately evident.

Q : *But wouldn't this move defeat KNN's goal of reaching out to all kinds of children in the Philippines, given the fact that those who have access to the Internet are computer-literate and are going to school?*

A : Well, possibly. But we have tried television, and found that we didn't have the right conditions to [reach out to the youth through it]. The Internet is the next best thing.

And, we also found that a surprising number of people who have emails and access the Internet are not what you would call ABC. And the other thing is that we want to make a cellphone link, a really dynamic cellphone interface, because the cellphone, is in fact, a computer. It's an interactive device. It's a digital wireless connectivity source. Now [although] it's very limited, granted that the scale is very small compared to other forms of getting online, it potentially gives access to the online world. And we're trying to develop a mechanism whereby kids can use their cellphones to contribute, and maybe even download from this media collaborative effort. We're trying to have ways where the youth can send up, and also bulletins that can come down.

Q : Knowing that so many changes have taken place since you started the program, what would you recommend those who would want to produce something like KNN?

A : You've got to find a mixture of entertainment value – very superficial, fast connection entertainment value – with educational, social messages. People don't want to watch educational television, so the educational-social messages have to be embedded. We did that with KNN. We never came out saying that this was an educational show, a human rights show, a development show, never. We never said that. We always said that it's a fun, information magazine news-style entertainment magazine show, by kids, for kids. All of the pro-social content is embedded. So that's what you have to do.

If you want to do something that lifts up the nation - lifts up people's awareness, their rights, their status of living life, their consciousness, their development, their skills – if you want to lift up using

television, you have to find a format that is a perfect blend of highly entertaining, interesting, attention-grabbing, and with a sort of social agenda. And that social agenda has to be not too strong, not too evident. It has to be three or four layers below the surface.

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